

JULY 1967

INTERNAL BULLETIN

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TORONTO

THESES ON QUEBEC Adopted by the (LSA) Plenum, July 9 (1967)

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(Introductory note— The following notes constitute only a provisional statement of the position of the Canadian Trotskyist movement on Quebec and the French-Canadian national question. It is expected that the 1968 convention of the Canadian section will discuss and adopt a more general resolution on this question, setting forth in considerable detail the revolutionary socialist position on nationalism and the tasks and perspectives facing our forces in Quebec.)

1) The 80% of French-Canadians who live in and around the present boundaries of the province of Quebec have all the characteristics of a **nation**. They are an historically constituted people, possessing a common language and cultural tradition. Insofar as industrial development, wage rates and trade patterns in Quebec may be distinguished from those of neighboring Ontario and the United States, the Québécois may be said to have a common economic life. Quebec's national peculiarity even receives partial, albeit distorted recognition in the British North America Act's provisions for the use of French as one of the official languages in Quebec, and for the sole right of the (province) to legislate for property and civil rights.

More decisive than these formal criteria, however, is the new national consciousness of the French-Canadians — the North American "Latin Americans" — which in the mere space of a few years has completely discredited the old English-Canadian chauvinist stereotypes of a "priest-ridden", backward, rural-oriented, conservative society. It is the existence of this national consciousness, and its inherent thrust toward an increasing national self-identification of French-Canadians as "Québécois", which more than anything also defines their national character and distinguishes the Québécois from other "nationalities" or distinct cultural sub-groupings within the present Canadian confederation.

Similarly, English Canada also constitutes a nation. The English-Canadian bourgeoisie has a long historical tradition, defined originally in the struggle against the American bourgeois revolution of the 18th century. It has its own state — dominating the central ("federal") regime at Ottawa, the source of the political oppression of the French-Canadian nation. It has, for the preceding reasons, a clearly defined common economic life. It is primarily these **political** criteria which define the national consciousness of English-Canadians, whose national "culture" is in other respects little more than an extension of North American Anglo-Saxon-dominated culture in general. The English Canadian nation, which has developed from a variety of national origins, of

which the English themselves form only a minority sector, is not characterized by a national cultural awareness nearly as profound as that found in Quebec. Its "nationalist" indifference is that of an oppressing nation, and broad layers of its population bear more than a trace of arrogance in their attitude toward French-Canadians and the French-Canadian nation.

2) The French-Canadian nation is an oppressed nation, subordinated politically to the federal regime, and economically to English-Canadian and American capitalist interests. Its subordinate status is manifested most obviously in the lower wages, incomes and living standards of Quebec when compared with those of, for example, Ontario which is also a developed, highly industrialized province.

While these relative wage differentials reflect the structural-economic uniqueness of French-Canada (Quebec), the language question, which starkly reveals the divorce between ownership and wage-labor, reflects in the most brutal and direct manner the **class**-political differentiations within Quebec industry and society. The language question shapes the national consciousness of French-Canadians more than any other factor. In fact, "Quebec nationalism" assumes in the first place the form of "language consciousness."

3) The source of French Canada's national oppression lies in its subordination to imperialism – the fact that the ownership and control of its natural resources and industry are not in the hands of the Québécois, but in the capitalist boardrooms of New York and Toronto and Montreal. The French-Canadian bourgeoisie, whose interests are indissolubly linked with those of the English-Canadian capitalist class (which in turn has no fundamental conflict of interests with American imperialism), lacks the means, the desire and indeed the rationale to put the control and ownership of those industries and resources into French-Canadian hands. While it is true that the language question — and the problem of wage differentials, too — **can** in general be resolved under capitalism without a socialist revolution, it is clear that the only way in which French-Canadians will assume control over the economy of Quebec is by socialism — the nationalization of industry and its operation by the workers themselves.

A socialist Quebec would likely federate in a free and equal union with a socialist United States of North America, including English-Canada, and the United States. The constitution of the new Socialist United States would undoubtedly protect the national integrity of present-day French-Canada by explicitly recognizing the right of self-determination of the French-Canadian nation.

While it is, true that in some important respects, Quebec resembles a colony, it is also true that it departs in significant features from the classic colonial model. A program for the national – and class — liberation of the French-Canadian proletariat cannot be derived from a simple definition of Quebec, e.g. a colony or not a colony, nor of its national bourgeoisie as "comprador", or "neo-bourgeois", or "imperialist." What counts above all are the internal class differences. To paraphrase Trotsky, when speaking of pre-revolutionary China, the following questions must be posed and answered: What are the classes which are struggling in Quebec? What are the interrelationships of these classes? How, and in what direction, are these relations being transformed? What are the objective tasks of the Quebec revolution, i.e., those tasks dictated by the course of development? On the shoulders of which classes rests the solution of these tasks? With what methods can they be solved?"

4) It is necessary to distinguish between "national consciousness" and

"nationalism" or, more correctly, between nationalism as a **tendency** and nationalism as a **movement**. All French-Canadians, whatever their social class position, have to some degree a common conscious self-identification as French-Canadians or Québécois, as distinct from, say, a sense of being "Canadian" or "internationalist". But national consciousness does not develop inevitably into a positive program of nationalism, still less into separatism. While national consciousness refers simply to the phenomenon of national identification, as part of a particular cultural grouping with a common history, language, and usually territory, nationalism, and **a fortiori** (*even more so*) separatism, refer to the conscious **program** for a national state.

Whether the national consciousness of the French-Canadian workers will develop into support for separatism and the creation of a separate state of Quebec distinct from the present Canadian confederation, depends on a number of factors and conditions which have yet to – and may never — mature (e.g., the complexity and sophistication of class divisions within the nation, extent and quality of already-existing relations between French-Canadian and English-Canadian workers; and on the geographical location and milieu of the given nationality, and the orientation and tasks of the struggle which necessarily follow from that location — e.g., in Algeria, the-struggle was necessarily for the creation of a separate national Arab state, and the creation of a strong national consciousness was a necessary part of the mass struggle for that state.)

5) "French-Canadian nationalism" cannot be defined by any one word or definition. In the broadest sense, it means at the present time, national self-consciousness, a national self-identity as Québécois, speaking a common language. It connotes a certain pride or at least awareness of the national culture of French-Canada, a group consciousness, a hatred of English domination, whether English-Canadian or American, and (amongst the more politically advanced), a disgust at the past lick-spittle "Uncle Tom" approach of the French-Canadian bourgeois "elites" which contributed so much to the maintenance of the political and economic oppression of the French-Canadian nation.

In the narrower sense, as applied to some strata or classes of the nation, it means the desire for a separate state of Quebec, going far beyond the almost universal demand for a somewhat enlarged political "autonomy" for French-Canada within a pan-Canadian political structure.

6) However, support for separatism and the nationalist movements in general (e.g., St-Jean-Baptist Societies) has so far been confined almost entirely to the petty-bourgeoisie, whether of the rural (Regroupment National), or urban (RIN) (*Rassemblement d'indépendance nationale, under the leadership of Pierre Bourgault, later absorbed into the PQ* --ed.) variety. Neither the working class nor the "big" bourgeoisie (financiers, industrials, etc.), which enjoy an essentially comprador relationship to foreign (non-French-Canadian) capital interests, has shown any marked tendency to be attracted to the nationalist program or movements. Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" is much more than the well-publicized growth in national consciousness and nationalism. More than anything else, it is the growing labor-consciousness militancy which has swept broad layers of the industrial proletariat, reaching even into "white-collar" ranks of the labor force, such as nurses, school-teachers, civil servants. In its most general sense, the Quiet Revolution is the product of the growth of an organized labor movement which has increased four-fold since the Second World War and doubled in the last five years. This growth takes place parallel with a mass exodus from the farms and rural regions, and an unprecedented growth in the industrial labor force. In the context of Quebec — the most **industrialized** province in Canada, with a well-developed

class conflict — the growing social consciousness of its masses does **not** assume a primarily nationalist-separatist orientation.

7) Nevertheless, what is only a tendency today — even a subdued, not very pronounced, tendency — may become a movement with mass roots and popular support tomorrow. Given the existence of the French-Canadian nation, and the growth a national consciousness, particularly among the young people, students or workers, as well as the existence of the separatist movement enjoying the electoral support of almost 10% of the population, it is necessary to advance and defend the right of self-determination of the French-Canadians — their right to determine their own fate, as a self-governing people. If a majority of the French-Canadians in and around the present province of Quebec should decide at some time to withdraw from the Canadian state and establish their own autonomous government, we would support them in that task. However, our defence of the right of self-determination does not mean that we, as revolutionary socialists, ourselves advocate separatism. We are not ourselves nationalists, still less separatists.

Where separatist sympathies have been pronounced among significant layers of advanced workers, as in the Catalan and Basque provinces of Spain of the 1930s, our movement has supported the democratic demand for a referendum or plebiscite on the question of separation. Similarly, we would support such a demand in Quebec, and throughout the French-Canadian nation, if at any time it becomes clear that the workers are orienting in that direction. However, it is unnecessary to put forth the demand for a referendum, or any democratic demand other than the necessarily abstract defence of the right of self-determination at this time, when there is little or no evidence to suggest that this is an urgent issue of importance to advanced French-Canadian workers. To this, it is necessary to add that a revolutionary socialist Canadian regime would consider as one of its first tasks the immediate convocation of a constituent assembly, democratically elected by the workers of both Canadian nations, to decide the character of the relations which they wish to obtain between the two nations in the Canadian workers' state. Until that time, so long as the federal government is in the hands of the bourgeoisie, both French- and English-speaking, the demand for self-determination means that only the French-speaking nation should decide its relation with English-Canada, without interference from the English-Canadians and their capitalist rulers.

Ultimately, of course, we recognize that the/national question will only be resolved, as a question, under socialism and a workers' regime in both Ottawa and' Quebec City. Nevertheless, the democratic demand in support of the right of self-determination is objectively transitional in character — its consistent presentation and application by both French- and English-Canadian comrades exposes the hypocrisy and reaction of the bourgeoisie which at every opportunity uses the national question as a divisive lever to split the working class of this country on the grounds of often-artificially induced "national distinctions."

8) The bourgeoisie's interest in maintaining and, in some instances, stimulating national-cultural distinctions between French and English has been most notably revealed in some of the retrograde results of the national question as they have developed in the past — viz., the powerful influence of the Church, in terms both of ideology and of influence in French-Canadian society in general (educational system, etc.) While it is true that their particularly oppressed situation means that French-Canadian workers are destined to play a vanguard — in fact, same might say, with justice, **the** vanguard (leading) role in the coming Canadian socialist revolution, this entirely correct affirmation does **not** mean that they are at present, or will always be, in

the leading positions. Today, some of the most militant strikes and labor struggles in this country are unfolding in French Canada. However, it is important that we do not close our eyes to the undeniable fact that, in other significant respects, French-Canadian workers are more **backward** than their backward English-Canadian brothers. This backwardness is nowhere evidenced more clearly in the unfortunate absence of a mass political party of the French-Canadian workers in Quebec. To overcome this weakness, which is the most important task facing the advanced workers and revolutionaries in Quebec today, our movement puts forward its demand for a labor party, for a party of the trade unions — the organizations which the workers have created themselves in the course of their hard-fought battles against the power and interests of capital. Only such a party will in the present conjuncture pose the historically necessary and progressive politicization of the Trade Union movement, and show the way to independent working class politics by carrying the revolutionary fight against the objectively reactionary trade union bureaucracy within the unions, onto the political plane, where, in the last analysis, it will be resolved.

9) In addition to our major demand for the labor party, we advance subsidiary, democratic demands expressing the socialist position on the national problems of French Canada. Among these are: the demand for a universal, non-clerical educational system, freed once and for all from the control of the Church, to be administered by the Quebec government. We solidarize with the demands of the nationalists for the establishment of French as the sole official language in Quebec. We enthusiastically and energetically support the growing trade union demand, particularly common among the industrial unions such as Autoworkers and Steelworkers, for wage parity with the most developed English-Canadian provinces, and even with the United States. (This demand for wage parity does not, of course, prevent us from supporting all wage demands which place French-Canadian workers in advance of other North American workers.)

Where the demand for trade union and labor party autonomy is advanced, we give it critical support. This demand is essentially progressive, reflecting a rejection of bureaucratic leaderships outside Quebec in which, we, too, profess no confidence. We, too, support French-Canadian control of the structures and program of the organizations of the French-Canadian workers, free from outside interference by the labor bureaucracies in English Canada or the United States. But we relentlessly insist that the fight against backward and bureaucratic leaderships is fundamentally political in character, and that the struggle against these misleaders must be waged around democratic, rather than primarily national, slogans. We are for the "liberté syndicale de tous les travailleurs canadiens-français," (trade union freedom for all French-Canadian workers — *LSA Editor*) and not simply advocates of French-Canadian trade unions for French-Canadians. We recognize that in the long, hard struggle that is to come against both the united Canadian capitalist class and its central regime, and the labor bureaucracies which in both nations have the same common sociological base — the privileged strata within the unions, and the self-identification with non-working class strata outside the unions — the strongest possible fraternal — **and organizational** links will prove of the utmost value to both English- and French-speaking workers, provided they do not hinder the internal democratic processes, and the free exchange of ideas and experiences between militants in the two nations. The successful Postal Workers' strike of 1965 only suggested the possibilities. The entry of the labor party concept into Quebec via the (predominantly English) NDP is another example of the progressive character of the already-existing interrelationships, the united character of the pan-Canadian class struggle. Thus, we refrain from categorically opting for or against "national" unions, or bargaining units, while at the same time supporting and where possible participating in all struggles of the

French-Canadian workers in specific situations which seek to advance their full control over their own organizations.

Similarly, we do not insist that the Quebec labor party, if and when it is organized, adhere as an integral national section to the New Democratic Party in English-Canada. (Still less do we insist that it **be** the NDP.) It may well be that the Quebec labor party will **not** develop directly out of the present, federal-oriented NPD-Québec, although it is clear that many of the forces around that formation even now will play a key role in the formation of the Quebec labor party, whatever its name or structure. Whatever the formal relations between a Quebec labor party and the NDP, however, the Trotskyists will entourage the closest fraternal and organisational ties between the respective socialist wings of the parties, as, for example, in the formation of a united Socialist Caucus formation in both national sections of a united party. A socialist caucus in the Quebec labor party, which may very well be more radical than the English-Canadian NDP right from its inception, thanks to "the privilege of historical backwardness," would provide a tremendous impetus and encouragement to the still-embryonic socialist forces presently within the English Canadian NDP. Similarly, the experiences of the NDP Socialist Caucus will prove valuable to the new socialist forces within the Quebec labor party.

11) The most important contribution of the Canadian Trotskyists to the unfolding struggle in French Canada has been and remains our concept of the revolutionary socialist, Bolshevik, party. In the struggle for the overthrow of the capitalist state, and the institution of a workers' and farmers' government leading to the establishment of a workers' state and the victory of socialism, the working class requires a disciplined combat party with a Marxist-Leninist program. In Quebec that party is the League Socialiste Ouvrière; in English-Canada, it is the League for Socialist Action. Because the political struggle in both French- and English-Canada remains oriented in the first place against a united Canadian capitalist class, and its central government in Ottawa, the LSA-LSO are united within a single organizational structure. The LSA-LSO is in complete solidarity with the other sections of the world Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International, and we share in common the transitional program of that movement. The relations between the LSA and LSO are described in the Political Committee statement "On LSA-LSO Relations", submitted in 1966, the main line of which this Plenum adopts.

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